Noor and Nasir show powers of recovery, Ashab cruises at Karachi Open

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: At a tournament which organisers believe will be a historic step towards helping Pakistan regain its lost squash glory, three players kept the national interest alive by winning in contrasting fashion to advance to the second round of the Karachi Open on Tuesday.

Leading local hope Noor Zaman, the the under-23 world champion, came from 2-1 down to overwhelm Melvil Scianimanico of France while Nasir Iqbal mounted an even greater comeback when he battled back from a two-game deficit to stun Egyptian Moustafa Elsirty.

In contrast, Mohammad Ashab Irfan blazed past Japan's Ryunosukue Tsukue but he faces the sternest test among the trio in the second round as he is up against top-seeded Egyptian Karim Abdel Gawad.

Tayyab Aslam was the only local casualty on the men's side on the opening day of the US$243,000 Professional Squash Association 'Gold' level championship as he was thrashed by Spaniard Iker Pajares.

On the women's side, Pakistan will have no representation in the second round after Sana Bahadur and Mariam Malik both lost their first-round clashes.

The clash between the game's up-and-coming stars Noor and Scianimanico lived up to its billing with the former taking the first game 11-9, only for the Frenchman to hit back by winning back-to-back games 12-10 and 11-3.

With a partisan crowd backing him, Noor recovered to take the next two games by identical 11-6 scorelines before dropping his racquet after securing the winning point.

The 49-minute victory sends world number 38 Noor to a second-round clash with Egyptian eighth seed Fares Dessouky.

Nasir had made an even greater comeback earlier when he rallied to down Elsirty 5-11, 8-11, 11-5, 11-9, 11-6 in the 56-minute duel.

"It was a really great match today," the 31-year-old, who next faces fifth seed Mohamad Zakaria of Egypt, said. "It was so supportive playing in front of a home crowd. Events like this will be so good for the younger generation of players.

"In the first two games, I was a bit slow in the mid-court, and after going 2-0 down, I got told to push Moustafa to the back two corners because he's so tall. When I pushed him back, it gave me some room and allowed me to play in short."

Ashab needed only 25 minutes to see off Tsukue 11-4, 11-6, 11-9 before he saw his compatriot Tayyab go down to Pajares 6-11, 2-11, 7-11.

On the other half of the draw, second seed Marwan Elshorbagy discovered his second-round opponent after France's Toufik Mekhalfi downed Henry Leung of Hong Kong 12-10, 11-3, 3-11, 11-4.

In other first-round matches, Alex Lau of Hong Kong eased past Malaysia's Sanjay Jeeva 11-9, 11-5, 11-9; Egypt's Yahya Elnawasany won three fiercely-contested games to beat Shahjahan Khan of the US 11-9, 12-10, 11-8 while his countryman Karim Al Hammamy swept past Spaniard Ivan Perez 11-6, 11-3, 11-6.

SANA, MARIAM EXIT

The women's competition saw Pakistan's challenge fizzle out early as both Sana and Mariam lost in straight games.

Sana, who is deaf and mute, fell to a 4-11, 1-11, 6-11 loss to Egypt's Mariam Metwally, while Mariam was ousted by Chan Sin Yuk of Hong Kong 2-11, 4-11, 0-11.

Top seed Amina Orfi will face a fellow Egyptian in the second round after Haya Ali overcame Nour Heikal 11-9, 11-9, 11-5, while Nadine Shahin of Egypt beat compatriot Habiba Hani 12-10, 11-7, 11-4 for a second-round clash with second-seeded Malaysian Siva Subramaniam.

Two matches spanned the full distance with Nour Aboulmakarim scraping past Malaysia's Aina Amani 7-11, 11-8, 11-2, 3-11, 11-6 while Torrie Malik of England won 13-15, 10-12, 11-9, 11-6, 11-5 against Egypt's Menna Hamed.

"I didn't really find my game in the first two games, although I was leading 10-9 in both of them. But I knew that I wasn't going to give up," said Malik.

In other matches, Nadine Garas of Egypt advanced past Hong Kong's Tong Tsz-Wing 11-5, 11-7, 11-8 and Amina El Rihany beat France's Marie Stephan 12-11, 11-7, 11-5.

KARACHI: Pakistan's Noor Zaman hits a return to Melvil Scianimanico of France during their Karachi Open first-round match at the DA Creek Club on Tuesday.—Courtesy PSA

Pakistan to test depth ahead of T20 World Cup in SL series

DAMBULLA: Pakistan will have one final go at testing their squad's depth ahead of next month's T20 World Cup when they take on Sri Lanka in a three-match series in Dambulla in the absence of stalwarts Babar Azam, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf.

The experienced trio, despite establishing themselves as integral cogs in Pakistan's

Match starts at 6:30pm (PST)

PAKISTAN captain Salman Ali Agha and his Sri Lankan counterpart Dasun Shanaka pose with the series trophy at the Rangiri Dambulla Cricket Stadium on Tuesday.—Courtesy PCB

plans for the showpiece, weren't picked owing to their stints in the ongoing Big Bash League (BBL) in Australia.

While Babar and Haris continue to feature in the league, Shaheen has returned home after picking up a knee injury and is currently undergoing rehab at the National Cricket Academy.

"They are mega stars and they have done so well for Pakistan but the people we have brought here are very good players as well," captain Salman Ali Agha told reporters on Tuesday. "They are the future of Pakistan, and hopefully they will come good.

Babar, Shaheen and Haris' unavailability, however, has opened doors for the return of all-rounder Shadab Khan, who aborted his BBL assignment with Sydney Thunder to play for the national side for the first time since June last year.

After recovering from a shoulder surgery, Shadab impressed in the BBL with seven wickets in six matches at 26.57 and came in handy with the bat, scoring 104 runs across four innings.

"He came back from a long injury and he has done well in the Big Bash," Salman said, while adding that choosing from a range of all-rounders available in the squad was a "good headache".

"Managing all those spinners and all those all-rounders, I know it's going to be tough, but to be very honest it's a luxury to have all-rounders who can bowl and bat in any kind of conditions and situations."

Another addition to the squad is that of promising batter Khawaja Nafay, whose flamboyant and stylish batting style recently translated into runs across domestic and league cricket. His selection, however, is as a squad player, who brings in utility as a wicket-keeper.

"Khawaja Nafay is an exciting cricketer, very good batsman," Salman noted. "The best thing is that he can keep as well.

"Very excited for him, and hopefully we can give him a game and the he can do what he has been doing so regularly in domestic and league cricket."

Pakistan will play all their T20 World Cup matches in Sri Lanka — co-hosts of the tournament along with India — and Salman believed the series will give an edge to his team in terms of preparation for the showpiece.

"This series is all about that; preparing for the World Cup," Salman said. "And it will obviously help to understanding the conditions more.

"We have been touring Sri Lanka so many times, we are familiar with the conditions, but before the world Cup, if you can come and play a series here, it will be an advantage."

Salman, however, hoped that Pakistan will win the series despite it being more about warming up for the bigger prize.

"We are a good team, hopefully everyone will chip in and we will win the series," he said.

Sri Lanka, meanwhile, recalled Test captain Dhananjaya de Silva to the T20 squad Tuesday for the Pakistan series.

All-rounder De Silva has not played a T20 since June 2024 against the Netherlands. The 18-member squad will be led by Dasun Shanaka as Sri Lanka gear up for the T20 World Cup.

The hosts' skipper admitted there are areas to fix after a mixed run in recent months.

"Our top order has done well in the last few series, but we need to sort out the middle order," Shanaka said, while explaining de Silva's recall.

"We needed someone who can steady the innings," he added. "If he can hold things together, others can play their shots around him. He also gives us a bowling option and in our conditions spin is key."

The second and third matches of the series will be played on Friday and Sunday. All three matches are at Dambulla.

Squads:

PAKISTAN: Salman Ali Agha (captain), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmad, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Khawaja Nafay (wicket-keeper), Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Salman Mirza, Mohammad Wasim Jnr, Naseem Shah, Sahibzada Farhan (wicket-keeper), Saim Ayub, Shadab Khan, Usman Khan (wicket-keeper), Usman Tariq

SRI LANKA: Dasun Shanaka (captain), Pathum Nissanka, Kamil Mishara, Kusal Mendis, Kusal Perera, Dhananjaya de Silva, Charith Asalanka, Janith Liyanage, Kamindu Mendis, Wanindu Hasaranga,Dunith Wellalage, Maheesh Theekshana, Dushan Hemantha, Traveen Mathew, Dushmantha Chameera, Matheesha Pathirana, Nuwan Thushara, Eshan Malinga.—Agencies

Pakistan win U-19 tri-series as Sameer scores record-breaking ton

HARARE: Players and officials of the Pakistan's under-19 team pose with the series trophy after beating Zimbabwe in the tri-series final at the Old Hararians Sports Club on Tuesday.—Courtesy Zimbabwe Cricket

HARARE: Opener Sameer Minhas had a century against his name yet again as Pakistan thrashed Zimbabwe by nine wickets in the U-19 tri-series final at the Old Hararians on Tuesday.

Sameer's latest ton was a record-breaking one as he surpassed Indian youth sensation Vaibhav Suriyavanshi by bringing up the milestone in 42 balls, taking 10 balls less than the latter's knock against England in July last year.

In doing so with his 114 off 41 balls that included 17 fours and five sixes, Sameer helped Pakistan chase down a meagure 159-run target with ease after pacer Umar Zaib had rattled the hosts with four wickets.

Pakistan captain Farhan Yousaf opted to field first, a decision that paid rich dividends as the bowling unit kept Zimbabwe under constant pressure.

Umar led the charge with an impressive 4-20, while Abdul Subhan provided able support by taking two wickets.

Zimbabwe struggled to build momentum after losing early wickets and were reduced to 15 for five inside seven overs. Michael Blignaut top-scored with 60 off 102 balls, while Tatenda Chimugoro added an unbeaten 28.

However, regular breakthroughs ensured the hosts were dismissed for 158 in 44.4 overs.

In turn, Sameer turned the final into a one-sided affair, sharing a 145-run opening-wicket partnership with Mohammad Shayan, who remained unbeaten on 38 off 42 balls, including four fours and one six.

The Pakistan youth outfit, which won the U-19 Asia Cup title last month, will now turn their attention to the U-19 World Cup, set to begin in Zimbabwe and Namibia from January 15.

Scores in brief:

ZIMBABWE U-19 158 in 44.4 overs (M. Blignaut 60, T. Chimugoro 28 not out; Umar Zaib 4-20, Abdul Subhan 2-25); PAKISTAN U-19 160-1 in 16.2 overs (Sameer Minhas 114, Mohammad Shayan 38 not out).—Agencies

Mustafizur registers for PSL after IPL snub

LAHORE: Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman has registered for the Pakistan Super League (PSL) draft following his release from the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) squad for the Indian Premier League (IPL).

The 30-year-old left-arm pacer, known for his variations and death-over bowling, was acquired by Kolkata for INR 9.20 crore in the IPL mini-auction held in December.

He was the only Bangladesh player signed for the season. On Saturday, Kolkata announced his release after receiving instructions from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI).

The decision comes amid strained relations between India and Bangladesh, linked to reports of attacks on minority communities in Bangladesh.

In response, Bangladesh has banned IPL broadcasts in the country and the Bangladesh Cricket Board has requested the ICC to shift its T20 World Cup matches from India to Sri Lanka.

Mustafizur, who has played in multiple IPL seasons since 2016 and taken over 60 wickets in the league, previously featured in the PSL for Lahore Qalandars. The PSL has confirmed his registration for the upcoming edition, with the draft expected soon.

TEN PARTIES TO VIE FOR TWO NEW FRANCHISES

With the upcoming season taking shape, as many as 10 parties will bid for two new franchises in an auction set to be held at the Jinnah Convention Centre in Islamabad on Thursday.

The bidder will look to seal the ownership rights of teams to be chosen from among city names Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Hyderabad, Sialkot, Muzaffarabad and Gilgit.

Notable parties, namely VGO Tel, a Karachi based mobile company, Jazz, a telecom company, DSM Tareen, led by former owner of Multan Sultans Ali Tareen, i2c (Fintech), a global fintech being run by a US-based Pakistani entrepreneur, Walee Tech (Media & Fintech), Prism Developers paired with Exchange ON all are included as bidders.

Moreover, Kingsmen Group (Investments) and Aim Next Inc (Tech & Innovation) are also in the run. —Sports Reporter

Left is sometimes right for Phillips

WELLINGTON: New Zealand batter Glenn Phillips said his audacious switch-hitting show in a recent Super Smash match was no gimmick but a tactical option he has honed for years to counter left-arm spin.

In last week's match against Central Districts, Otago right-hander Phillips switched stance while off-spinner Dean Foxcroft was midway through his run-up, and hit the bowler for a four with what could have been mistaken for a full-blooded cover drive from a left-handed batter.

Jaws dropped further in the final over of the Otago innings when Phillips took up a left-hander's stance even before left-arm spinner Jayden Lennox had begun his run-up and hit the bowler for a six.

"I do enjoy my left-handed batting training," Phillips, who smashed an unbeaten 90 off 48 balls in the game, said before leaving for New Zealand's white-ball tour of India on Tuesday.

"Obviously, I do it for multiple reasons. One, just to keep both hands and both sides of the brain working, but [also] for the opportunity to take down left-arm spin."

England's Kevin Pieterson pioneered switch-hitting, while Australian duo David Warner and Glenn Maxwell had it in their armoury but used it mostly to explore gaps behind or square of the wicket.

"I've always been able to bat left-handed. It's something I've done since I was young," Phillips said. "I was going to switch when I was about 10-years-old and actually bat left-handed full time, but decided to stick with the right hand as it was."

Teams often employ a left-arm orthodox spinner to take the ball away from a right-handed batter, especially in the 20-overs format.

Phillips said he even faced pacers in the nets with a switched stance. "It's been a few years since it's really had a chance to come out ... but for it to actually pay off, was really [pleasing]," he added.—Reuters

Head, Smith centuries put Australia on front foot in fifth Ashes Test

SYDNEY: Travis Head scored 163 and Steve Smith became the second-most prolific Ashes run-scorer of all time on the way to his century as Australia took a first-innings lead of 134 on the third day of the fifth Test against England on Tuesday.

Already 3-1 up in the series with the urn secured for another 18 months, Australia finished the day on 518 for seven with Smith 129 not out and Beau Webster unbeaten on 42.

Head's century, brought up off 105 balls, was his third of the series, while skipper Smith hit the hundred mark for the 13th time in his 41 Ashes contests.

There was disappointment, however, for Usman Khawaja, who received a rapturous reception from the Sydney Cricket Ground crowd as he came out to bat in his final Test before retirement but managed only 17 runs before falling to a full toss.

Sydney has offered the most bat-friendly surface of the series and it was heavy work in blazing sunshine for the England bowlers, especially in the final session when the shine had worn off the second new ball.

England seamer Matthew Potts came in for particularly heavy punishment from the Australian batsmen in his first match in the series, going for 141 runs from 25 overs.

Head made the most of the old ball at the start of the day when, resuming on 91 with Australia 166-2, he attacked with a relish that has become his trademark since moving to the top of the order in Perth.

He hammered a four through the covers for his 12th Test century before raising his helmet aloft on the handle of his bat and taking Australia to lunch at 281-3.

Scoreboard

ENGLAND (1st Innings) 384 (J. Root 160; M. Neser 4-60)
AUSTRALIA (1st Innings, overnight 166-2):
T Head lbw b Bethell 163
J. Weatherald lbw b Stokes 21
M. Labuschagne c Bethell b Stokes 48
M. Neser c Smith b Carse 24
S. Smith not out 129
U. Khawaja lbw b Carse 17
A. Carey c Bethell b Tongue 16
C. Green c Duckett b Carse 37
B. Webster not out 42
EXTRAS (B-4, LB-8, NB-5, W-4) 21
TOTAL (for seven wickets, 124 overs) 518
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-57 (Weatherald), 2-162 (Labuschagne), 3-234 (Neser), 4-288 (Head), 5-339 (Khawaja), 6-366 (Carey), 7-437 (Green)
STILL TO BAT: M. Starc, S. Boland
BOWLING: Carse 23-2-108-3 (1w), Potts 25-1-141-0 (2w), Tongue 27-0-89-1 , Stokes 26-6-87-2 (5nb), Jacks 8-0-31-0, Bethell 15-1-50-1 (1w)

Brydon Carse (3-108) had finally dismissed Michael Neser for 24 but only after the nightwatchman had faced 90 balls and England had burned their final DRS review in a failed attempt to remove him.

That brought Smith to the crease and he put on 54 for the fourth wicket with Head before the opener, who had been dropped cold on the boundary by Will Jacks on 121, perished attempting to sweep Jacob Bethell's occasional spin.

"The game's been good to me for a couple of weeks," said Head. "Bit of luck here and there. I've liked the new ball. I've liked the ball coming on, harder ball, catchers behind the wicket and opportunities to score is something that I've always liked."

Khawaja and Alex Carey, who scored 16, came and went as England got something out of the new ball but Smith batted on, firing a four past the bowler to reach the 50-mark for the 45th time.

Australia were just seven runs behind England's tally of 384 at tea and quickly overhauled it after the break.

All-rounder Cameron Green put on 71 for the seventh wicket with Smith before departing for 37 courtesy of an ill-judged shot that ballooned to Ben Duckett at square leg.

Smith, fidgeting and adjusting his equipment in customary fashion between deliveries, moved inexorably towards the century mark, however, getting over the line by scurrying for three runs.

The 46,161-strong crowd, clad in pink for the annual Jane McGrath charity day, rose to their feet as one to celebrate a 37th Test hundred from one Australia's greatest batters.

The 36-year-old had already passed Jack Hobbs on the list of highest run scorers in Ashes Tests, his tally of 3,683 against England now trailing only the great Donald Bradman (5,028).

AUSTRALIAN batter Steven Smith plays a shot during the fifth Test against England at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Tuesday.—Reuters

"It was a tough day but that's what it's about," said Bethell. "We've got to come out tomorrow, take those three wickets early and get back in it again. Everyone's still very driven to leave Australia 3-2 (down)."—Reuters